



Engaging diverse stakeholders to inform and align district strategic planning with the LCAP, support continuous improvement and address inequities: Early learnings from San Juan USD's innovative approaches

This brief was developed in partnership with San Juan Unified School District and the California Alliance for Continuous Improvement, a project of Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation (CDEF).

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Project Context and Objective

California has established a transformative new accountability and continuous improvement system. Core elements of the system that have been introduced in recent years include: the California School Dashboard, which provides school-level and district data (and student subgroup data) on multiple state and local indicators; Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), which every district and charter school must adopt with stakeholder input; the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which directs additional funds to students based on their needs, including children from low-income families, English learners, and foster and homeless youth; and lastly, a System of Support intended to provide differing levels of support and technical assistance to school districts based on areas of need identified by the Dashboard. Three primary objectives of the new system are to: 1) drive continuous improvement in school districts based on multiple indicators; 2) advance equity, and 2) inform and engage local stakeholders so they participate more meaningfully in planning and funding discussions, based on the theory of action that local stakeholders are best positioned to identify student needs and drive improvement approaches in their schools.

How are the elements of the state's system changes actually leading to authentic engagement and change at the school and district levels? To help provide an answer to this question, we sought to look “under the hood” at one California school district, San Juan Unified in Sacramento County. The district is led by Superintendent Kent Kern and governed by a five-member elected board of trustees. Beginning with the 2019-2020 school year, the district designed and implemented new processes to better inform its strategic planning by engaging diverse students, parents, educators and staff. The district's work leverages state tools and policies such as the California School Dashboard, the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), plus state and federal accountability and

support systems, to broaden stakeholder engagement and utilize multiple data indicators to drive inquiry, address inequities and ultimately improve practices. CDEF worked with the district's Director of Continuous Improvement and LCAP, Adam Ebrahim, to detail and analyze the district's processes, including a review of documents and materials, and observation of meetings and activities. Interviews with several district staff members directly involved in planning and activities were also conducted to provide input from multiple perspectives.

Our objective was to gain a better understanding of what strategies the district is employing, what is working, and what else may be needed to strengthen the work, in order to share observations and early learnings about promising practices and challenges to inform other school districts and practitioners. Our work also seeks to further inform state level policymakers based on tangible school district experiences.

About the School District

San Juan Unified School District covers 75 square miles in Sacramento County. Nearly 40,000 students attend 64 schools, including approximately 53 percent from low-income families (compared to 60 percent statewide), 5 percent homeless, .6 percent foster youth, and 12 percent with special needs. In terms of race/ethnicity, about 53 percent of the students are white, 24 percent Hispanic (compared to 55 percent statewide), 7 percent Asian, 7 percent African-American, 6 percent two or more races, and approximately 1 percent each Pacific Islander, American Indian and Filipino.

Slightly less than 15 percent of students are classified as English Learners (compared to 19 percent statewide). Students in the district speak 72 different languages, with the most prevalent being Spanish, Persian (Farsi/Dari/Pashto), Arabic, Russian and Ukrainian. Additionally, the district serves a growing population of refugee students and families.

Data from 2019 [California School Dashboard](#) show that for most indicators, the district as a whole rates in the middle (Yellow), with indicators for mathematics and College and Career Readiness slightly lower (Orange). However, the Dashboard's equity report by student subgroup shows lower ratings (Orange or Red) for one or more subgroups of students on multiple indicators.

The district's mission states: "We empower all in our inclusive learning community to contribute and thrive in a radically evolving world."



Synopsis of the District's Impact Strategy

“There is a collective consciousness around the need to gather student and family voice – the district is moving in a positive direction.”

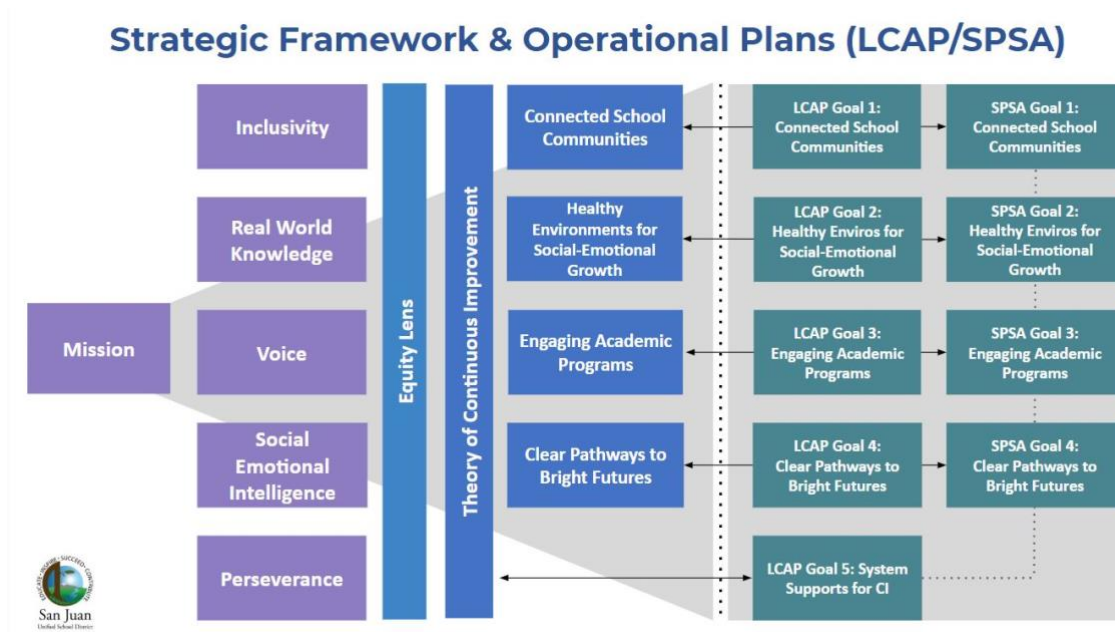
Beginning in the 2019-2020 school year, San Juan USD embarked on an ambitious effort to strengthen and align its strategic plan and LCAP, and to better inform the planning by expanding the scope of listening and learning in the district. To do this, the district created wider avenues for considering data and gathering and sharing input from diverse stakeholders. Ultimately, the district anticipates that the LCAP, once adopted in June, will essentially serve as the “operationalization” part of the Strategic Framework (see Table A).

Key activities in this process between August 2019 and February 2020 included:

- 1) Initial “input gathering” sessions utilizing a 35-member **Strategic Plan Task Force** that consisted of equal numbers of parents and community members (half), and administrators, educators and school staff (half). Participants organized into “mixed teams” to reflect together on the district’s Dashboard and demographic data, then to engage in rounds of inquiry about what populations and perspectives needed to be heard from and what additional questions needed to be asked based on the data.
- 2) Further inquiry and **design planning** by district staff and labor partners to develop an approach for carrying out the next phases.
- 3) Expanded, highly intentional inquiry and input gathering and sharing, utilizing a new **“Cultural Brokers”** approach and a series of **regional forums** with the goal of soliciting perspectives from student and family groups previously not centered in district decision-making and/or most impacted by inequities revealed by the data. Prompt questions for soliciting and compiling input were organized around the **eight state priorities** set forth in the LCFF-LCAP.
- 4) Parallel listening and learning approaches informed by data, plus **targeted capacity building in continuous improvement strategies** specifically at school sites identified for additional assistance through the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – as part of the district’s “collaborative system for continuous improvement.”
- 5) Development of a **“Strategic Framework”** including a mission and four **“Focus Areas,”** each aligned to specific Dashboard data points, as well as to the state’s LCFF-LCAP priority areas and the district’s collaborative system for continuous improvement.
- 6) Deeper discussions by a series of **LCAP “Focus Teams”** composed of a cross-section of staff and labor partners organized around five goal areas flowing from the strategic framework.
- 7) Reflection, consideration and further inquiry of the more expansive input by the district’s **LCAP Parent Advisory Committee (PAC)** and **District English Language Advisory Committee (DELAC)**, drawing on updated state and district data, the Cultural Brokers’ reports, the regional forums and additional student/family group convenings.¹

¹Note: This brief covers activities taking place through February 15, based on the duration of a research grant. Additional rounds of feedback and input will occur between February-May, 2020, leading to formal adoption of the district’s LCAP by June 2020.

TABLE A



A Closer Look: More details about specific approaches and activities

“The strategic planning process-LCAP is a good time for districts to understand who their students are. We used a process that allowed us to open the district up and be willing to listen to perspectives – students, plus parents, plus educators and staff who directly support them – it’s an expansive process.”

Data and Demographics

Data played an integral role. Participants in the Strategic Task Force explored Dashboard data and district demographic data with a focus on articulating “who we are, how we’re changing, whose voices are lost in the data, and how we can ensure their voices are not lost in the process.”

Breakout groups were formed by data indicators: chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, academics (English Language Arts/Mathematics, plus STEAM), and graduation rates/college and career readiness. The groups especially considered the intersection of data and the student sub-group information available on the Dashboard to identify inequities, needs and further questions that should be asked, such as: “What are the lived experiences of the data from the perspective of our stakeholders?” and “What questions does it generate?” In this way, as the district’s LCAP Director stated, data was the “jumping off point for empathy gathering.” Among

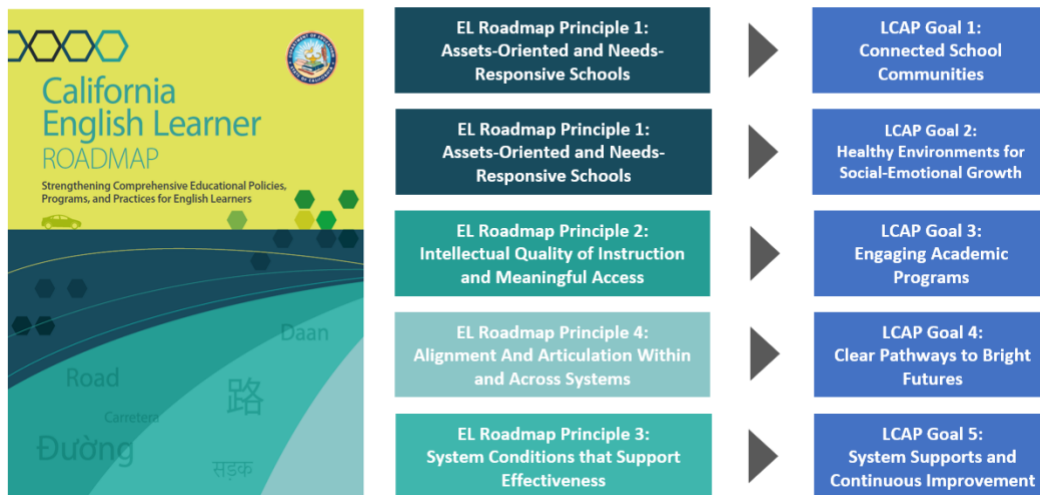
its uses, the district encouraged participants to seek out and understand lived experience from multiple perspectives. Participants were further urged not to look at data to “jump to conclusions,” but to “identify areas for further inquiry and empathy gathering.”

Next were three Regional Forums attended by site teams made up of administrators, teachers, classified staff, parents, students (at the secondary sites) and community members. These teams used data to surface shared values and address questions posed by the initial Strategic Task Force group. Teams from 92 percent of the school sites participated in one of the three regional forums. Intended outcomes for participants at the regional forums included:

- Understanding the connection between the strategic plan and the new 3-year LCAP, and
- Providing input into the shared values, focus areas, and equity components of the strategic plan.

Data review and inquiry also occurred at DELAC meetings, including an initial session introducing parents of English learners to the basics of the Dashboard site – how to access it, what it includes, etc., before delving more into the ratings and information. The district’s LCAP team and English Learner Services team further collaborated to align new LCAP goals to the [California English Learner Roadmap](#). This alignment was accompanied by a series of trainings at monthly DELAC meetings to help members understand San Juan USD’s programs and services for English Learners through the lens of the EL Roadmap and provide input into the development of the LCAP aligned to EL Roadmap principles. Further, EL Services staff are using EL Roadmap Principles and Elements to better understand existing services and gathering input from stakeholders as part of their continuous improvement efforts.

EL Roadmap and New LCAP Alignment



Equity Lens and “Cultural Brokers”

At every stage of San Juan USD’s process, participants were encouraged to view their work through an “equity lens,” defined in the Strategic Framework as “Through policies, practices, programs and decisions, San Juan USD will reduce the predictability of which students fail by utilizing an equity lens to eliminate barriers for our specific populations.”

Equity also relates powerfully to engagement and empowerment. As Derek Mitchell, CEO of Partners in School Innovation states, “Equity is keeping the populations who are furthest from success at the center of decision-making.” As part of its design, San Juan USD focused on utilizing data to inquire more about who was not “at the table” and how to ensure important voices were not lost in the process. This led to creation of a “Cultural Brokers” model.

The district’s intent was to solicit perspectives from student and family groups who have not previously had as much of a “voice” in the district and/or who are most impacted by inequities revealed in the data. The Strategic Task Force also asked, “Which identities are absent from the Dashboard?” Some examples of student groups “absent” from the Dashboard that the district focused on are: LGBTQ youth, youth from refugee families, and youth with differing special needs.

“From a systems level, it’s awesome that we’re getting out there and listening to stakeholders – especially students. Students are more apt to open up with a person who looks like them. It’s very valuable for our district leaders to hear the genuine voices of students and parents – and in the past they were selected “strategically” – it has to be genuine, not just selective.”



Essentially, the cultural brokers approach was about connecting trusted staff with particular students/communities. The district design team recognized that in addition to identifying which voices needed to be heard, “who is gathering the information is important, too. That’s why the brokers idea was born.”

Brokers are credible, representative intermediaries; they are members of an identity group or those who have a close affinity with a group that the district sought to connect with and amplify the voice of. For example, a district staff member who identified as LGBTQ might serve as the broker for LGBTQ students, or a bilingual instructional assistant might serve as a broker for English Learner parents. Cultural brokers were identified among the district staff based on their connection to and understanding of student groups, regardless of their role in the district (“Administrator, classified staff, it didn’t matter.”) In some cases, brokers also relied significantly on school site staff such as parent liaisons to help build further bridges with and access to diverse parents.

Cultural brokers conducted outreach and held meetings to gather input from specific groups of students, parents and staff about their needs. Prompts that led to the development of the district’s shared values were also used to solicit input. For instance, parents were asked:

- What are the skills and experiences students need to be ready for college and careers?
- What qualities and characteristics do we want to see in our children when they come back to visit as adults?



Input that informs and shapes the LCAP

Input from the cultural brokers and regional forums was compiled into a compelling, summative [Cultural Brokers Network report](#) that was shared with all members of the district’s administration, Strategic Task Force, the LCAP PAC, DELAC, staff teams, and more.

During the next phase of meetings and discussions, participants were encouraged to “cite evidence” from the report and from data to support comments and recommendations. The intent was to ensure that all of the diverse voices and perspectives engaged through the cultural brokers’ process were considered and heard by those on the committees and bodies ultimately formulating the plans and recommendations.

Another innovative feature of the district’s approach was the creation of five LCAP Focus Teams consisting of staff members holding different positions within the district. Each team focused on one of the five goal areas in the strategic framework/LCAP plan (which also align generally with Dashboard data areas.) The LCAP Focus Teams also then met with the PAC (Parent Advisory Committee) and DELAC (District English Language Acquisition Committee) to further strengthen the flow of information and connection between educators, staff, parents and students. The “cross-functional” nature of the LCAP Focus Teams and their interaction with the PAC and DELAC was intended to build a greater sense of collective ownership and shared accountability for the work.

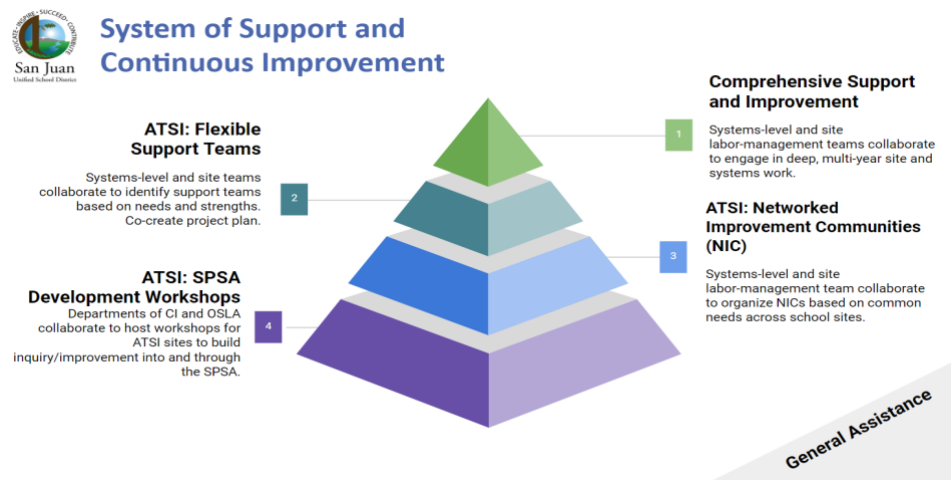
Collaborative System for Continuous Improvement

In tandem with the key activities described above, beginning in fall 2019 the district designed and implemented a strategy to support school sites identified for either [Comprehensive Support and Improvement \(CSI\)](#) or [Additional Targeted Support and Improvement \(ATSI\)](#) through the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), plus those eligible for some type of assistance through the State’s System of Support.

Many of the approaches employed for this targeted work at eligible school sites paralleled the approaches underway districtwide for gathering diverse input into the strategic framework and LCAP – such as utilizing data to initiate inquiry, and facilitating listening and learning about and among the most impacted stakeholders. In this case, input helped inform development of each site’s School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA). To support this work, district staff held a series of SPSA development workshops in the fall and early winter to train site leaders.

Significantly, the district also revised its SPSA template, both to streamline it and align it better with the LCAP priority areas, in order to ultimately achieve “goal to goal alignment” between each SPSA and the district LCAP. The district also transitioned the annual timeline for adoption of the SPSAs from November (which allowed less time for stakeholder engagement and input) to June (which allows more time for input and coincides with the LCAP timeline). The transition to a June SPSA approval timeline and the decision to align LCAP and SPSA goals were conducted in partnership with principals from all sites in the district. Principals were invited to consider possible scenarios for the SPSA timeline and LCAP goal alignment, and vote, with near unanimous support, for the new timeline and alignment with the LCAP.

Because many sites (14) were eligible for ATSI due to Dashboard indicators related to Students With Disabilities, the district engaged a consultant as a partner to develop a “**Networked Improvement Community**” consisting of two cohorts of site teams with the goal of building greater capacity for ongoing continuous improvement systems work. Each site team included an administrator, certificated union representative, general education teacher and a special education staff member. Principals at each of these sites received additional training. In total, 10 site teams participated in the Networked Improvement Community.



In addition to the work with school sites identified for ATSI and CSI, cohorts of district administrators throughout the Division of Teaching and Learning participated as teams in continuous improvement training offered through the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Teams were organized with an emphasis on connecting those that do not ordinarily work with one another in order to lay the foundation for future coordinated school support. Team members also are those in charge of many of the LCAP actions and services. Participation in the Carnegie cohorts is also intended to support the design of continuous improvement processes within the new articulation of programs and services in the new LCAP.

Key Considerations and Early Lessons

“It’s some of the best outreach we’ve ever done. It has been a pretty powerful experience. There’s actually a network of communication occurring, a beautiful cross-section of stakeholders involved, and not necessarily based on hierarchy or position but on relational proximity. People not normally asked were asked to help.”

Based on observations of the district’s work and interviews with those who were/are part of the process, we offer the following early lessons and considerations. This list is not intended to be comprehensive and should be understood as preliminary, since much of the work is ongoing.

1. **Intentionality matters.** San Juan USD’s experiences affirm that districts should design highly intentional approaches to seeking input from stakeholders (whether cultural brokers or other models). Generating authentic input does not happen by chance. As it identified key stakeholders to reach out to and implemented specific activities to connect with them, the district also saw that people at various levels on staff desired to become more involved if given the opportunity.
2. **There is significant enthusiasm about the more expansive and diverse input process.** The cultural brokers model in particular shows promise and has already contributed to a sense that more real-life experiences and perspectives of those “furthest away from success” and/or those traditionally “overlooked” are being shared with district decisionmakers. The Cultural Brokers model honors the importance of personal identity as well. As one person noted, “Identity matters to people. People want their identity to be valued.” The final [Cultural Brokers report](#) also was a powerful and concise method for communicating the diverse input; however...
3. **It’s too soon to determine how the input will ultimately inform the district’s LCAP strategies and ongoing work.** As one district staff member noted, “The process has been really valuable. [But] I am wondering how we will hold ourselves accountable...From practice to action, it varies sometimes. How do we continue this work in a way that is going to genuinely enforce/implement the [mission and] equity lens across the district? How do we sustain this kind of work over time? How do we hold each other accountable for the work?” These are important questions the district should continue to thoughtfully consider and address at each stage going forward.
4. **California School Dashboard data is useful – especially the breakdown of data by student groups.** Participants effectively utilized data from the California School Dashboard. In particular, the Dashboard’s equity information – data on the multiple indicators broken down by many different subgroups of students, including by race – especially helped participants to spot inequities and drive inquiry. The district also identified important student groups that do not “show up” in Dashboard data; the district sought to ensure their perspectives and input were compiled as well. To augment the Dashboard, the district also shared and utilized additional local performance and demographic data, which contributed further value to the conversations and inquiry. At its best, the Dashboard and local data both serve as a “jumping off point for greater

empathy gathering.” In its processes, the district emphasizes that data should not be used to leap to conclusions, but to shine a light on areas where more questions need to be asked to enhance understanding.

- 5. Greater cross-functional engagement and collaboration is viewed as a major positive outcome from the process.** Engagement, information sharing and collaboration across positions and functions in the district was cited often as a strength of the process. As one district staff member said, “For the first time I’m seeing collaboration and dialogue across [job] titles. They [administrators] are also hearing the same things that we’re hearing. It’s comprehensive and articulated across the district, not just one department. All stakeholders – assistant superintendents, directors, program managers, specialists – they’re all hearing the same information and that’s valuable.” Participants also noted that the process enabled them to at times step outside of the standard district hierarchy in ways that were helpful to advance new ideas. Since the LCAP was envisioned in part as a means to facilitate district innovation, this seems like a positive result.
- 6. Awareness about the importance of family engagement has increased across the district.** The district utilized the LCAP “reflection metric” for family engagement. In addition, the inquiry and input process have, as one district staff member stated, “Lifted family engagement up in terms of importance... There is a lot more integration of family engagement throughout the district,” including family engagement staff being invited to participate in more areas.



- 7. The LCAP can be used to authentically drive system improvement.** San Juan USD’s work to align its strategic planning with the LCAP is promising in a number of regards. It demonstrates that a district’s use of the LCAP can be “totally authentic,” as one staff member noted – as opposed to merely being viewed as a “compliance” document. San Juan USD’s experience shows how the LCAP can become a collaborative “improvement tool” for inquiry cycles, cross-departmental teams and system improvement. And it shows how a district’s strategic plan and LCAP can be effectively integrated, so that the LCAP goals and strategies essentially build from and operationalize the mission and strategic framework.

8. **Internal structures should reflect the innovative spirit of LCAP.** San Juan has made deliberate efforts to break down silos through cross-functional teams. The LCAP Director felt empowered to design and lead implementation of a new process, even if it meant stepping outside of some traditional structures and silos. How and where the LCAP (and continuous improvement work) is situated within a district’s structure – who oversees it, what departments are involved, how it’s communicated internally – have important ramifications. System and structural “inertia” – people falling back on what is comfortable, “what they know,” or how things have been done in the past – can be a constant threat to innovation.
9. **Aligning LCAP processes with continuous improvement systems work is highly valuable.** San Juan USD’s work to align all School Plans for Student Achievement (SPSAs) with LCAP goals is exciting and holds great promise for more meaningfully connecting the district-level LCAP to and with sites. Equally exciting are the efforts to integrate the district’s collaborative system of continuous improvement throughout all aspects of the district’s planning activities, and to systemically integrate assistance or support mechanisms through the federal ESSA and/or the State System of Support. San Juan USD benefits in this regard by having the Director’s portfolio include both the district’s continuous improvement and LCAP work.

STRENGTHENING and SCALING THE WORK: Additional suggestions for districts

Based on observations and participant interviews, we offer the following additional suggestions, especially for districts interested in trying new approaches and strengthening their efforts.

Districts should consider:

1. Designing and implementing outreach activities as early as possible.
2. Devoting ample time to carry out the work. It was noted that “it can be time-consuming to coordinate, make the connections, engage sites, and really hone in and delve in more, to be able to say to parent, ‘So tell me more about that? What do you think are the root causes?’”
3. Building a team that encompasses the many and various skill sets needed to successfully design and implement an inclusive process. These skills do not, however, all have to be embodied in one person. Essential skills and experiences for a team include: Community organizing; knowledge of continuous improvement-design thinking; experience and understanding of the organization’s communications structures and “power” dynamics; convening and facilitations skills; knowledge about data; budget expertise; dynamic cultural awareness, and connections and working knowledge of labor unions; among others.
4. Bridging the types of data available on the Dashboard with information and data that is specific to individual students and more directly relevant to parents. The initial “entry point” for many parents (and especially EL parents) is often through the experiences of their own child/student. “Parents want to know how to navigate the school system, to

understand what their child needs, who they can go to for help, how can they help their child at home (especially if they don't know English).” There is a need for more resources to help empower families, especially EL families – helping them to learn what questions to ask. This is an important need that districts should fulfill that is distinct from engaging parents in the strategic planning and LCAP processes.

5. Developing additional, concise materials and trainings that help parents – and also teachers -- understand how to read and understand the Dashboard and data. It was noted that many teachers are not yet very aware of the Dashboard, and their increased awareness and involvement would be beneficial for students and families.
6. Going deeper into “identity focused” prompt questions as part of the input and empathy gathering processes, especially once trust has been built among different groups and communities. For example, questions that elicit more input from students about their sense of belonging. “Hearing more of the lived experience of kids – that’s important.” To do so requires building trust and creating safe spaces for kids to share their stories.

Credits

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